The Wreckers': "Small Town Swingers" | Book #6

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The Wreckers': "Small Town Swingers" | Book #6

by brentclarkpalmer

Summary

Vanessa Smart swore she'd never set foot in Millfield, Illinois again. But family obligation has a way of dragging you back, and a graduation she can't skip lands her and Jordan in the one kind of place their talents were never meant to find: quiet, wholesome, and suffocatingly ordinary, where the sidewalks roll up at nine and everyone remembers everyone. Then a restless local couple — nine years married, two kids, and quietly starving for something they can't name — works up the nerve to approach the two strangers at the back of Murphy's Tavern. It should be a harmless detour. The Wreckers don't do harmless. Trading the series' usual glamour for screen doors and casserole dishes, this claustrophobic entry proves they never needed a skyline to do their worst.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The Reluctant Aunt

The town of Millfield, Illinois, was exactly the kind of place Vanessa had spent her entire adult life trying to forget.

It was the kind of town where the sidewalks rolled up at nine o'clock, where everyone knew everyone else's business, and where the biggest scandal in the last five years had been when the high school principal got caught having an affair with the school librarian. It was quiet. Respectable. Suffocating.

And now she was back.

Vanessa stood outside the Millfield High School gymnasium, arms crossed, watching as families poured out of the building after the graduation ceremony. The air was thick with the smell of cut grass, cheap perfume, and that particular Midwest humidity that clung to your skin like a second layer. Teenagers in caps and gowns posed for photos while their parents beamed with pride. It was wholesome. It was sweet.

It was making Vanessa's skin crawl.

Jordan stood beside her, looking deeply out of place in his tailored black suit and expensive sunglasses. He had his hands in his pockets, watching the crowd with the same expression a wolf might wear while observing a flock of particularly dull sheep.

"I still don't understand why we're here," he said for the third time that evening.

Vanessa sighed.

"Because my sister guilt-tripped me into coming. And because if I didn't show up, I'd never hear the end of it. Family obligations, Jordan. Even monsters have them sometimes."

Jordan gave her a sideways glance.

"You could have come alone."

"And miss the chance to drag you into small-town hell with me?" Vanessa smiled. "Never."

Jordan muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "I'm going to make you pay for this later," but Vanessa pretended not to hear.

They had only been in Millfield for six hours, and already she could feel the town pressing in on her. The same streets she had walked as a teenager. The same judgmental stares from people who remembered her as "that Smart girl who got out and never looked back." The same suffocating sense that everyone was watching, judging, and whispering behind their hands.

She hated it.

But she was here. And she was going to make the best of it.

Or at least survive it.

After the ceremony, Vanessa's sister had insisted they all go out for dinner. Vanessa had politely declined, claiming she and Jordan were exhausted from the drive. In reality, she just needed a drink. Several drinks.

Which was how they ended up at **Murphy's Tavern**, the only bar in town that stayed open past ten o'clock on a weeknight.

The place was exactly what Vanessa had expected — dim lighting, worn wooden booths, a jukebox in the corner playing classic rock, and the faint smell of beer and fried food clinging to everything. It was the kind of bar where the same people had been drinking for thirty years and would probably die there.

Vanessa and Jordan took a booth in the back corner. She ordered a glass of red wine (the only decent option on the menu), and Jordan ordered a whiskey, neat. They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, both of them decompressing from the forced family gathering.

Then Jordan reached into his jacket pocket.

"I have something for you," he said.

Vanessa raised an eyebrow.

"If it's another one of your terrible jokes, I swear I will stab you with this fork."

Jordan smirked and pulled out a small, laminated card. He slid it across the table toward her.

Vanessa picked it up.

It was a simple black business card with clean white text. On one side, it read:

THE WRECKERS
Rules of Engagement

She flipped it over.

1. We never fall in love with our targets.
2. We never keep them.
3. When the job is done, we fuck like the world is ending.

Vanessa stared at the card for a long moment, then looked up at Jordan with a mixture of amusement and disbelief.

"You made us *laminated business cards*?"

Jordan shrugged, looking far too pleased with himself.

“I got tired of repeating the rules every time we start a new job. Figured this would be more efficient.”

Vanessa let out a short laugh.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m practical,” he corrected. “And I thought you’d appreciate the gesture.”

Vanessa shook her head, still smiling as she tucked the card into her purse.

“I do. It’s very… you.”

They were still chuckling when the couple approached their table.

Vanessa noticed them first — a man and woman in their late thirties, both dressed casually but neatly, the kind of people who clearly belonged in this town. The woman had soft brown hair and kind eyes. The man looked like he had played football in high school and still carried himself with that quiet, slightly faded confidence.

They stopped a few feet from the booth, looking slightly nervous but determined.

“Excuse me,” the woman said. “We don’t mean to bother you, but… we couldn’t help noticing you two earlier. At the graduation.”

Vanessa smiled politely, already slipping into her social mask.

“Oh?”

The man cleared his throat.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

Jordan leaned back in the booth, studying them with mild interest.

“What gave it away?”

The woman laughed softly.

“Everything, honestly. You both look like you stepped out of a magazine. We were wondering if you might be up for some company? Maybe buy you a drink?”

Vanessa and Jordan exchanged a glance.

This was unexpected.

But interesting.

Vanessa gestured to the empty seats across from them.

“Please. Sit.”

The couple slid into the booth, looking both excited and slightly terrified.

“I’m Mark,” the man said. “This is my wife, Claire.”

“Vanessa,” Vanessa replied smoothly. “And this is Jordan.”

Claire smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“We don’t usually do this kind of thing,” she admitted. “Approaching strangers in bars, I mean. But you two just… you seem different. Sophisticated. Like you might understand.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“Understand what, exactly?”

Mark and Claire exchanged a look. Then Mark leaned forward, lowering his voice.

“We’ve been married for nine years,” he said. “We have two kids. And lately… well, things have gotten a little… routine. In the bedroom.”

Claire nodded, her cheeks slightly pink.

“We love each other. We really do. But we’ve been talking, and we think we’re ready to try something new. Something exciting. But we want to do it *together*. We don’t want to sneak around or cheat. We want to be honest with each other.”

Mark nodded.

“We were hoping you might be interested in… exploring with us. Just once. Or maybe more than once, if it goes well.”

Vanessa took a slow sip of her wine, hiding her smile behind the glass.

Jordan’s expression remained perfectly neutral, but she could feel the shift in his energy beside her.

This was almost too easy.

Claire looked between them, hopeful and nervous.

“So… what do you think?”

Vanessa set her glass down and smiled.

“Well,” she said softly. “That’s certainly an interesting proposition.”

Jordan glanced at her, his eyes gleaming with dark amusement.

Vanessa met his gaze.

And in that moment, they both knew.

These two had just invited the monsters in.

And they had no idea what they had done.

Chapter 2: The Proposition

Chapter 2: The Proposition (Cleaned Up Version)

Mark and Claire barely made it through the front door of their modest two-story house before the conversation started.

Claire kicked off her heels the second they were inside and turned to her husband with wide eyes.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Did that really just happen?”

Mark closed the door behind them and leaned against it, running a hand through his hair.

“Yeah,” he said, sounding slightly dazed. “I think it did.”

They stood there in the entryway for a moment, staring at each other. Then Claire let out a breathless laugh.

“They were *so* hot,” she said. “Like… unfairly hot. Did you see the way she looked at us? Like she already knew exactly what we were thinking?”

Mark nodded, still looking a little shell-shocked.

“And the guy — Jordan? He barely said anything, but when he did… Jesus. I felt like he was looking straight through me.”

Claire bit her lip, her cheeks still flushed.

“I can’t believe we actually did it. We actually asked them.”

Mark stepped closer and pulled her into a hug, resting his chin on top of her head.

“You were brave,” he said. “I was proud of you.”

Claire wrapped her arms around his waist and let out a shaky breath.

“I’m terrified,” she admitted. “But also… really excited. They seemed perfect, didn’t they? Sophisticated. Experienced. Like they’d done this before and knew exactly how to make it not weird.”

Mark was quiet for a second.

“Yeah,” he said. “They did.”

They stood there holding each other in the dark hallway, the weight of what they’d just done settling over them.

“Do you think they’ll say yes?” Claire asked quietly.

Mark kissed the top of her head.

“I don’t know. But if they do… we’re really doing this.”

Claire pulled back just enough to look up at him.

“Together,” she said. “Like we promised.”

Mark nodded.

“Together.”

The next morning, across town, breakfast at Vanessa’s sister’s house was in full swing.

The kitchen smelled like burnt toast, cheap coffee, and whatever casserole had been thrown together at the last minute. Vanessa sat at the small kitchen table, her black cast propped up on a chair, while her sister, **Lisa**, bustled around in an old T-shirt and yoga pants. Her husband, **Dave**, sat at the head of the table reading the newspaper like it was still 1997. And Vanessa’s nephew, **Tyler**, was scrolling through his phone, occasionally glancing at Jordan like he was an alien who had just landed in their kitchen.

Jordan, for his part, looked like he was mentally calculating how many ways he could murder everyone in the room and get away with it.

“So,” Lisa said brightly, setting a plate of slightly overcooked eggs in front of Vanessa, “how long are you two staying in town?”

Vanessa forced a smile.

“Just a few more days. Jordan has work to get back to.”

Dave lowered his newspaper and looked at Jordan over the top of his reading glasses.

“What line of work are you in, son?”

Jordan’s expression didn’t change.

“Consulting.”

Dave nodded like this explained everything.

“Consulting,” he repeated. “That’s good. Stable work.”

Jordan took a slow sip of his coffee — which was somehow both burnt *and* watery — and said nothing.

Just then, there was a knock at the back door. A moment later, the neighbor — **Mrs. Henderson** — let herself in without waiting for an invitation. She was in her late sixties, wearing a floral housecoat and carrying a Tupperware container.

“Lisa, dear, I brought you some of my famous banana bread,” she announced, setting the container on the counter. Then she noticed Vanessa and Jordan and her eyes lit up.

“Oh! You must be Vanessa’s young man,” she said, looking Jordan up and down like he was a prize stallion at the county fair. “My, my. You’re quite the specimen, aren’t you?”

Jordan’s smile was thin.

“So I’ve been told.”

Mrs. Henderson turned to Vanessa, clasping her hands together like she was about to deliver profound wisdom.

“You know, dear,” she said, lowering her voice as if she were sharing state secrets, “a woman like you needs to be careful. You’re like a *hothouse flower* — delicate, exotic, and far too refined for this little town. Don’t let these small-town boys clip your wings.”

There was a long, painful silence.

Jordan took another sip of his coffee, his face completely blank.

Vanessa pressed her lips together, clearly trying not to laugh.

Tyler finally looked up from his phone.

“Mrs. Henderson,” he said, deadpan, “did you just compare Aunt Vanessa to a plant?”

Mrs. Henderson beamed.

“I did! A very *special* plant.”

Just then, Lisa’s eyes landed on Vanessa’s cast.

“Oh! I almost forgot to ask — what happened to your leg, sweetie? That looks serious.”

Vanessa smiled, keeping her tone light.

“Oh, it’s nothing dramatic. I had a little skiing accident in Switzerland a couple of weeks ago. Torn ACL. Nothing a little surgery and physical therapy won’t fix.”

The entire table went quiet.

Lisa’s eyes widened.

“Switzerland?” she repeated, like Vanessa had just said she’d been to the moon.

Dave lowered his newspaper again.

“You went skiing in *Switzerland*?”

Tyler actually put his phone down.

“That’s… kinda badass, Aunt Vanessa.”

Mrs. Henderson clutched her chest like she’d just heard the most exotic thing in her entire life.

“Well, I’ll be,” she said. “A real live hothouse flower who skis in the Alps. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

Vanessa smiled politely, but inside she was dying.

Jordan took another sip of his coffee, his expression perfectly neutral.

“Switzerland,” he repeated softly, just loud enough for Vanessa to hear. “How very… exotic.”

Vanessa’s shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

Lisa, completely oblivious, kept talking.

“So, Vanessa, when are you going to settle down? You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

Jordan made a small choking sound into his coffee.

Vanessa didn’t scold him. She simply reached over and gently rubbed his back once — a small, private gesture that said *I see you. I’m sorry you’re suffering. You’re not alone in this.*

Jordan glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and for the briefest moment, the corner of his mouth twitched.

He appreciated that she understood.

End of Chapter 2

Chapter 3: The First Taste

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The hotel room was too warm.

Mark stood awkwardly near the foot of the bed, still fully dressed, while Claire sat on the edge of the mattress in her bra and panties, her arms crossed over her chest like she was trying to make herself smaller. The air was thick with tension and the faint scent of cheap hotel air freshener.

Vanessa and Jordan stood across from them, fully clothed, watching.

Vanessa leaned against the dresser, her black cast resting on the floor, her expression calm and unreadable. Jordan stood beside her with his hands in his pockets, his gaze cool and assessing.

“So…” Mark cleared his throat, his voice slightly too loud in the quiet room. “How do we, uh… start this?”

Vanessa tilted her head slightly.

“How would you like to start?” she asked, her tone polite but distant.

Claire glanced at Mark, then back at Vanessa and Jordan.

“We were thinking… maybe we could all just… get comfortable first?” she suggested, her voice small.

Jordan didn’t move.

“Comfortable,” he repeated, as if tasting the word. “Interesting choice.”

Vanessa pushed off the dresser and walked slowly toward the bed, leaning lightly on her crutches. The soft rubber tips made almost no sound against the carpet as she approached Claire. She stopped in front of her and looked down.

“Take off the rest of your clothes,” she said quietly.

Claire’s cheeks flushed deep red.

“Oh. Okay. Right now?”

“Yes.”

Claire hesitated for a moment, then reached behind her back and unclasped her bra. She let it fall to the floor, then slowly slid her panties down her legs. She kept her arms crossed over her chest afterward, her breathing shallow.

Mark shifted uncomfortably.

“Should I…?”

Vanessa glanced at him.

“Not yet.”

She turned her attention back to Claire, reaching out and gently lifting the other woman’s chin with two fingers.

“Look at me.”

Claire obeyed, her eyes wide and uncertain.

Vanessa studied her face for a long moment, then let her hand drop.

“You’re nervous,” she observed.

Claire let out a shaky laugh.

“A little. This is… new for us.”

Vanessa’s smile was small and cold.

“I can tell.”

She stepped back and looked at Jordan.

“What do you think?”

Jordan’s eyes moved slowly over Claire’s body, clinical and detached.

“She’s pretty,” he said. “But she’s shaking.”

Claire’s face burned.

Mark took a half-step forward.

“Hey, maybe we can slow down a little—”

“No,” Vanessa interrupted, her voice calm but firm. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? To try something new? To be adventurous?”

Mark swallowed.

“Yeah, but—”

“Then stop talking and watch.”

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Vanessa reached out and ran her fingers lightly down Claire's arm, watching the way the other woman shivered at the touch. It wasn't affectionate. It was observational. Like she was testing a reaction.

"You're very responsive," Vanessa murmured. "That's good."

Claire's breathing had quickened. She looked like she didn't know whether to be flattered or terrified.

Jordan finally moved. He walked over to Mark and stopped in front of him, close enough that Mark had to tilt his head back slightly to meet his eyes.

"Take off your shirt," Jordan said.

Mark hesitated.

"Now?"

Jordan didn't repeat himself. He simply waited.

After a moment, Mark pulled his shirt over his head, his movements stiff and self-conscious. He stood there shirtless, his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides.

Jordan looked him up and down, then gave a small, almost disappointed nod.

"You're soft," he said. "Not in bad shape, but… soft."

Mark's jaw tightened.

"I work out when I can."

"I'm sure you do."

Vanessa glanced over at them, then turned her attention back to Claire.

"Lie back on the bed."

Claire obeyed, lying down stiffly, her hands still covering her breasts. Vanessa climbed onto the bed and straddled her waist, fully clothed, looking down at her with cool detachment.

"You're very tense," she observed. "Relax."

Claire let out a nervous laugh.

"I'm trying."

Vanessa reached down and gently moved Claire's hands away from her chest.

"Don't hide," she said. "We're all here for the same reason, aren't we?"

Claire nodded, but her eyes were wide and uncertain.

Vanessa leaned down until her face was inches from Claire's.

"Tell me something," she whispered. "When you imagined this… did you picture it feeling like this?"

Claire swallowed.

"I… I don't know what I pictured."

Vanessa smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"I thought so."

She sat back up and looked over at Jordan.

"Your turn."

Jordan stepped away from Mark and walked over to the bed. He looked down at Claire for a long moment, then reached out and traced a single finger down the center of her chest. Claire shivered violently.

"She's sensitive," he noted.

Vanessa nodded.

"Very."

Mark shifted from foot to foot near the foot of the bed, clearly uncomfortable.

"Should I… join in now?"

Vanessa glanced at him.

"Not yet. Just watch."

Mark swallowed hard but stayed where he was.

For the next twenty minutes, Vanessa and Jordan continued their slow, clinical exploration of Claire's body — touching, observing, commenting on her reactions as if she were an interesting specimen rather than a person. They were polite. They were calm. But there was no warmth in it. No real desire.

Just assessment.

Claire lay there the entire time, her breathing uneven, her eyes darting between Vanessa and Jordan like she wasn't sure what was happening.

Eventually, Vanessa sat back and looked at Jordan.

"I think that's enough for tonight."

Jordan nodded.

“Agreed.”

They both stood up and began straightening their clothes as if nothing unusual had happened.

Mark and Claire stared at them, confused and unsettled.

“That’s it?” Mark asked.

Vanessa smiled politely.

“For now. We don’t want to overwhelm you on your first time.”

Claire sat up slowly, pulling the sheet over her chest.

“Oh. Okay. Um… thank you?”

Vanessa’s smile didn’t waver.

“You’re welcome.”

Mark and Claire got dressed in awkward silence, stealing glances at Vanessa and Jordan the entire time. When they were finally ready to leave, Claire paused at the door.

“Will we… see you again?” she asked, her voice small.

Vanessa tilted her head.

“We’ll be in touch.”

Mark nodded, looking relieved.

“Okay. Good. That was… nice.”

Jordan’s expression didn’t change.

“Was it?”

Mark blinked.

“Uh… yeah?”

Vanessa opened the door for them.

“Goodnight, you two. Get home safe.”

Mark and Claire stepped into the hallway, still looking slightly dazed. As the door closed behind them, Vanessa and Jordan could hear Claire whisper:

“That was… weird, right?”

Mark’s reply was faint but audible.

“Yeah. Really fucking weird.”

Back in the room, Vanessa turned to Jordan with a small, satisfied smile.

“Well,” she said. “That was certainly… illuminating.”

Jordan walked over to the minibar and poured himself a drink.

“They’re going to be thinking about that for days,” he said. “Wondering what they did wrong. Wondering why it felt so… off.”

Vanessa sat down on the edge of the bed, her cast resting on the floor.

“They expected excitement,” she said. “They got studied instead.”

Jordan took a sip of his drink and looked at her over the rim of the glass.

“You enjoyed that.”

Vanessa’s smile widened.

“Didn’t you?”

Jordan didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

They both knew the truth.

The first taste had been given.

And the hunger was only just beginning.

End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4: Seeds of Doubt

Chapter 4: Seeds of Doubt

Claire stared at the ceiling of their bedroom, wide awake even though it was past midnight.

Mark lay beside her, also awake, though neither of them had spoken for the last twenty minutes. The only sound in the room was the soft hum of the ceiling fan and the occasional creak of the old house settling.

They hadn't had sex since the encounter with Vanessa and Jordan four days ago.

Claire couldn't stop thinking about it.

She had expected it to feel exciting. Thrilling. Maybe even a little dirty in a fun way. Instead, she kept replaying the memory in her head and feeling… strange. Exposed. Like she had shown something private to people who didn't actually care about her at all.

Vanessa had been so calm. So detached. The way she touched her, studied her, commented on her body like she was examining a specimen under glass — it hadn't felt passionate. It had felt clinical.

And Jordan… God. The way he had looked at Mark. The quiet judgment in his voice when he said *"You're soft."* It had stung more than Claire expected.

She turned her head slightly on the pillow.

"Mark?" she whispered.

"Yeah?"

Claire hesitated.

"Do you think… they liked us?"

Mark was quiet for a long moment.

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "It didn't really feel like they were enjoying themselves. It felt like they were… watching us. Like we were some kind of experiment."

Claire swallowed.

"Yeah," she said softly. "That's what it felt like to me too."

They lay there in silence again.

Claire stared at the dark ceiling, her chest feeling tight.

“I thought it would make us closer,” she whispered. “I thought it would be fun. Something we could share.”

Mark reached over and found her hand in the dark, squeezing it gently.

“Me too.”

But neither of them said what they were both thinking.

It didn’t feel like sharing. It felt like we gave something away.

The next afternoon, Claire met Vanessa for coffee at a quiet café on the edge of town.

Vanessa was already there when Claire arrived, sitting at a corner table with her crutches resting against the wall. She looked effortlessly elegant in a cream sweater and dark jeans, her cast propped up on a small footstool she had clearly brought with her.

Claire slid into the seat across from her, suddenly feeling underdressed in her simple blouse and jeans.

“Thanks for meeting me,” she said, a little nervous.

Vanessa smiled warmly.

“Of course. I was hoping we could talk.”

They ordered their drinks and made small talk for a few minutes — the weather, the town, how Claire’s kids were doing in school. Then Vanessa leaned forward slightly, her voice softening.

“How have you been feeling since the other night?”

Claire looked down at her latte, tracing the rim of the cup with one finger.

“Honestly?” she said. “A little… confused. I thought it would feel different. More exciting. But ever since then, I’ve just felt kind of… off. Like something’s wrong with me.”

Vanessa tilted her head, her expression sympathetic.

“Why would you think something’s wrong with *you*?”

Claire hesitated.

“I don’t know. I just… I keep thinking about how calm you both were. How detached. It made me feel like maybe I did something wrong. Or like I wasn’t… enough.”

Vanessa reached across the table and gently touched Claire’s hand.

“Claire,” she said softly, “you were perfect. Truly. But I have to be honest with you — sometimes when people try something new like this, it reveals things they weren’t expecting.”

Claire looked up.

“What do you mean?”

Vanessa gave her a small, understanding smile.

“I mean that sometimes it shows you things about your marriage. Or about yourself. Things you might not have noticed before.”

Claire was quiet for a moment.

“You think there’s something wrong with my marriage?”

Vanessa squeezed her hand gently.

“I think you’re a very perceptive woman. And I think you already know the answer to that.”

Across town, Jordan sat across from Mark at a quiet corner table in Murphy’s Tavern.

Mark looked tired. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he kept fidgeting with his beer glass.

“I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me,” Mark muttered. “Ever since that night, I can’t stop thinking about it. And not in a good way.”

Jordan took a slow sip of his whiskey, watching Mark carefully.

“What do you mean?”

Mark ran a hand through his hair.

“I keep thinking about how you looked at me. The way you said I was ‘soft.’ It’s been stuck in my head. I’ve been hitting the gym every day since then like a fucking maniac, and I still feel like… like I wasn’t good enough.”

Jordan leaned back in his chair, his expression calm.

“Mark,” he said, “I wasn’t insulting you. I was just being honest. You’re a good-looking guy. But there’s a difference between being in shape and having real presence. Real confidence.”

Mark looked down at his beer.

“I used to feel confident,” he admitted. “Back when Claire and I first got together. But lately… I don’t know. Everything just feels routine. Boring. And now after that night, I feel even worse.”

Jordan tilted his head.

“Have you talked to Claire about how you’re feeling?”

Mark shook his head.

“I don’t even know how to bring it up. She’s been quiet too. Distant. I keep wondering if she’s disappointed in me. If she thinks I wasn’t enough for her that night.”

Jordan took another sip of his drink.

“Sometimes,” he said quietly, “when couples try something like this, it exposes the cracks that were already there. It doesn’t create them — it just makes them impossible to ignore.”

Mark stared at his beer for a long moment.

“You really think that’s what’s happening?”

Jordan met his eyes.

“I think you already know the answer.”

That night, Mark and Claire lay in bed again, both of them wide awake.

Claire turned onto her side to face him.

“Mark?”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated.

“Do you think we made a mistake?”

Mark was quiet for a long time.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “But something feels… off. Between us. And I don’t know how to fix it.”

Claire reached out and took his hand.

“Me neither.”

They lay there in the dark, holding hands, both of them feeling the first real cracks forming in the foundation of their marriage.

Neither of them realized the cracks had names.

Vanessa.

And Jordan.

End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5: The Slow Poison

Chapter 5: The Slow Poison

Claire lay on her back in their bed, staring up at the ceiling fan as it spun slowly above her. Mark was between her legs, moving inside her with steady, familiar rhythm — the same way he had for the past nine years.

But tonight, something felt different.

She couldn't stop thinking about *them*.

Every time Mark thrust into her, her mind flashed back to Vanessa's cool, detached touch. To the way Jordan had looked at her like he was studying an interesting specimen. To the clinical way they had commented on her body, her reactions, her sensitivity.

"You're very responsive. That's good."

Claire closed her eyes, but the memory only grew sharper.

She tried to focus on Mark — on the feel of his hands on her hips, the familiar weight of his body, the sound of his breathing. But her mind kept drifting back to that hotel room. To how *detached* Vanessa and Jordan had been. How *unimpressed*.

A horrible thought crept in:

Did they think I was bad at this?

Mark groaned softly above her, his movements speeding up slightly.

"Fuck, Claire… you feel so good."

Claire forced herself to moan in response, but it felt hollow. Performative.

She kept picturing Vanessa's face — calm, elegant, slightly amused — and Jordan's cool, assessing gaze.

They probably do this all the time, she thought. *With people who are way better at it than me.*

Mark came with a low groan, burying his face in her neck. Claire faked her own orgasm a few seconds later, making the right sounds, moving the right way — but inside, she felt nothing.

When Mark rolled off her and pulled her into his arms, she lay there stiffly, staring at the wall.

"You okay?" he murmured sleepily.

“Yeah,” she lied. “Just tired.”

Mark kissed her shoulder and fell asleep within minutes.

Claire stayed awake for a long time, her mind racing.

They probably think I’m boring. Vanilla. Not adventurous enough. Not sexy enough.

She hated how much she cared what they thought.

Across town, Mark sat in his truck in the grocery store parking lot, staring at nothing.

He had told Claire he was running errands, but the truth was he just needed a few minutes alone with his thoughts.

He couldn’t stop replaying that night either.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Jordan looking at him with that cool, slightly disappointed expression.

“You’re soft.”

The words had burrowed into his brain like a parasite.

He had been hitting the gym harder than ever since that night. He was sore. Exhausted. But every time he looked in the mirror, all he could hear was Jordan’s voice.

You’re soft.

Mark gripped the steering wheel tighter.

He had always thought he was in decent shape for a guy in his late thirties. But compared to Jordan — tall, lean, sharp, confident — he suddenly felt… inadequate. Weak. Like a joke.

And then there was the way Jordan had looked at Claire.

The way he had touched her.

Mark hated how much it bothered him.

He hated that he kept wondering if Claire had enjoyed it more than she let on. If she had been comparing him to Jordan in her head the whole time.

He hated that he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

His phone buzzed in the cup holder. A text from Claire.

Claire: *Can you pick up milk on your way home?*

Mark stared at the message for a long moment before replying.

Mark: *Yeah. Be home soon.*

He started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot, but the knot in his stomach didn't go away.

Something had changed between them.

And he didn't know how to fix it.

That night, Mark and Claire tried again.

They kissed in the kitchen while making dinner. They touched each other in the shower. They climbed into bed with the clear intention of having sex.

But the moment Mark was inside her, the same thoughts flooded Claire's mind.

They probably do this with people who are way hotter than me. Way more experienced. I probably seemed so awkward to them.

She tried to push the thoughts away, but they only grew louder.

Mark was trying — she could tell. He was being gentle, attentive, saying all the right things. But she could feel the distance between them. The hesitation. The doubt.

When it was over, they lay side by side in the dark, neither of them speaking.

Finally, Claire broke the silence.

"Do you think they're going to call us?" she asked quietly.

Mark was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know," he said. "Do you… want them to?"

Claire stared up at the ceiling.

"I don't know either."

They fell into silence again.

Neither of them said what they were both thinking.

Something's wrong with us now.

And I don't know how to make it right.

End of Chapter 5

Chapter 6: The Comparison

Chapter 6: The Comparison

“I just don’t understand why you keep bringing them up.”

Mark’s voice was tight as he stood in the kitchen, arms crossed over his chest. Claire stood across from him by the sink, her hands gripping the counter behind her.

“I’m not *bringing them up*,” she said. “I’m just saying… they seemed so confident. So comfortable in their own skin. I keep thinking about how calm Vanessa was. How she didn’t seem nervous at all.”

Mark let out a short, bitter laugh.

“Yeah, well, Jordan didn’t exactly seem impressed with me either.”

Claire looked at him, surprised.

“What do you mean?”

Mark ran a hand through his hair, pacing the small kitchen.

“He said I was *soft*. Remember? Like I was some out-of-shape dad who couldn’t keep up with the big boys. I’ve been killing myself at the gym every day since then, and I still feel like shit about it.”

Claire was quiet for a moment.

“I didn’t know it bothered you that much.”

Mark stopped pacing and looked at her.

“Of course it bothered me. How could it not? The guy looked at me like I was… beneath him. And then he touched *you* like he already knew exactly what you needed. Like I’ve been doing it wrong for nine years.”

Claire’s face flushed.

“Mark—”

“I’m not stupid, Claire,” he cut her off. “I saw the way you reacted to him. The way you looked at Vanessa. You were into it. More than you’ve been into *me* in a long time.”

Claire stared at him, hurt flashing across her face.

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” Mark asked. “Be honest. When was the last time you looked at me the way you looked at them that night?”

Claire opened her mouth, then closed it. She had no answer.

Mark let out a long breath and leaned against the counter, suddenly looking exhausted.

“I feel like I’m not enough for you anymore,” he said quietly. “And I hate that I feel that way.”

Claire’s eyes filled with tears.

“I feel the same way,” she whispered. “I keep thinking about how Vanessa touched me. How confident she was. How… *skilled*. And I keep wondering if I’m just… boring. Vanilla. Not good enough.”

Mark looked at her for a long moment.

“We’re comparing ourselves to them,” he said. “And it’s fucking us up.”

Claire wiped her eyes.

“I know. But I can’t stop. Every time we try to have sex now, I’m thinking about them. About how *detached* they were. How *unimpressed*. It’s like they ruined it for us.”

Mark walked over and pulled her into his arms, resting his chin on top of her head.

“I hate this,” he murmured. “I hate that we’re letting two strangers get inside our heads like this.”

Claire pressed her face into his chest.

“Me too.”

They stood there holding each other in the kitchen, but the embrace felt different than it used to. There was tension underneath the comfort. Doubt. Insecurity.

Neither of them said what they were both thinking.

We’re falling apart.

And we don’t know how to stop it.

That night, they tried to have sex again.

It started the same way it always did — slow kisses, familiar touches, the routine they had perfected over nine years of marriage. But within minutes, the thoughts crept back in.

Claire kept picturing Vanessa's cool, elegant hands on her body. The way she had studied her reactions like a scientist. The way she had made Claire feel both seen and completely exposed at the same time.

Mark kept hearing Jordan's voice in his head.

"You're soft."

He tried to push the thought away, but it only grew louder.

When he finally came, it felt mechanical. Empty. Claire faked her orgasm a few seconds later, the same way she had the last few times.

Afterward, they lay side by side in the dark, neither of them speaking.

Finally, Claire broke the silence.

"Do you think they're thinking about us?" she asked quietly.

Mark stared up at the ceiling.

"I don't know. Probably not."

Claire turned onto her side to face him.

"Do you think we were… disappointing?"

Mark closed his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Claire was quiet for a long moment.

"Okay."

She rolled over, turning her back to him.

Mark stared at the ceiling for a long time, listening to her breathing slowly even out as she fell asleep.

He had never felt so far away from his wife.

And he had no idea how to close the distance.

End of Chapter 6

Chapter 7: The Wedge

Chapter 7: The Wedge

Claire sat across from Vanessa at a small table in the back corner of the café, nervously stirring her latte even though it was already cold. She had been the one to text Vanessa first this time — something she never would have done a few weeks ago.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Claire said, her voice low. “Ever since that night, I can’t stop thinking about it. About *you*. About how… different it felt.”

Vanessa tilted her head, her expression gentle and understanding.

“Different how?”

Claire hesitated, then looked down at her cup.

“It felt like you actually *saw* me. Like you knew exactly what I needed without me having to say it. Mark tries, but… it’s not the same. He doesn’t look at me the way you did.”

Vanessa reached across the table and gently touched Claire’s hand.

“That’s not your fault,” she said softly. “Some people just have a natural… presence. An energy. It’s not something you can force.”

Claire looked up, her eyes searching Vanessa’s face.

“Do you think there’s something wrong with me? For feeling this way?”

Vanessa smiled, warm and reassuring.

“Not at all. I think it means you’re honest with yourself. Most people aren’t brave enough to admit when something’s missing.”

Claire let out a shaky breath.

“I feel like I’m going crazy. Every time Mark touches me now, I’m thinking about you. About how *detached* you were. How *in control*. It’s like you ruined me for anything else.”

Vanessa’s thumb brushed lightly over Claire’s knuckles.

“You’re not ruined,” she said. “You’re just… waking up. Realizing what you actually want. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Claire swallowed hard.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Vanessa leaned in slightly, her voice dropping.

“You don’t have to do anything right now. Just… let yourself feel it. Let yourself want it. That’s the first step.”

Claire looked at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

Vanessa smiled.

“Good girl.”

Across town, Jordan sat across from Mark at a quiet corner table in Murphy’s Tavern, nursing a glass of whiskey while Mark nursed a beer and his pride.

“I’ve been killing myself at the gym,” Mark muttered, staring down at his glass. “Every single day. I’m sore as hell. But every time I look in the mirror, I still hear your voice in my head.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow.

“What voice?”

Mark looked up.

“‘You’re soft.’ That’s what you said. And you were right. I *am* soft. I’ve been soft for years. Sitting behind a desk, letting myself go, thinking I was still the same guy I was at twenty-five.”

Jordan took a slow sip of his drink.

“There’s nothing wrong with being soft,” he said. “Some women like it. But Claire… she didn’t seem particularly impressed that night, did she?”

Mark’s jaw tightened.

“She looked at *you* like you were something she’d been waiting for her whole life.”

Jordan didn’t deny it.

“She did,” he agreed. “And you saw it too. That’s what’s eating at you.”

Mark ran a hand through his hair.

“I feel like I’m losing her. Like she’s slipping away and I don’t know how to stop it.”

Jordan leaned forward slightly, his voice calm and measured.

“Maybe that’s because you never really had her the way you thought you did.”

Mark looked at him sharply.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Jordan met his gaze without flinching.

“It means that maybe Claire has always wanted something more. Something stronger. Something you’ve never been able to give her. And now that she’s seen what that looks like… she can’t unsee it.”

Mark stared at him, his expression a mixture of anger and fear.

“You’re saying she wants *you* more than she wants me.”

Jordan took another sip of his whiskey.

“I’m saying she’s finally being honest with herself. And that’s not something you can blame her for.”

Mark looked down at his beer, his shoulders slumping.

“I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Jordan’s voice was quiet, almost sympathetic.

“Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is let someone go. Before you both end up resenting each other.”

Mark didn’t answer.

He just sat there, staring into his glass, while the first real seeds of resentment took root in his chest.

That night, Mark and Claire barely spoke.

They moved around each other in the kitchen like strangers, the tension between them thick and unspoken. When they finally went to bed, they lay on opposite sides of the mattress, both of them wide awake.

Claire stared at the wall, her mind full of Vanessa — her voice, her touch, the way she had made her feel seen in a way Mark never had.

Mark stared at the ceiling, his mind full of Jordan — his calm confidence, his quiet judgment, the way he had looked at Claire like he already knew exactly what she needed.

Neither of them reached for the other.

Neither of them said a word.

The wedge had been driven deep.

And it was only going to get wider.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter 8: Ever Since That Night

Chapter 8: The Breaking Point

Claire stood in the kitchen, staring at the sink full of dirty dishes from dinner. She had asked Mark three times to help clean up. He had said he would “in a minute” every single time.

That had been two hours ago.

She could hear him in the living room, watching TV like nothing was wrong. Like their marriage wasn’t slowly rotting from the inside out.

Claire gripped the edge of the counter, her knuckles turning white.

She was so tired.

Tired of pretending everything was fine.
Tired of the silence between them.
Tired of feeling like she was the only one who noticed how broken they had become.

She walked into the living room and stood in front of the TV, blocking his view.

Mark looked up, annoyed.

“What?”

“We need to talk,” Claire said, her voice tight.

Mark sighed and muted the television.

“About what?”

Claire let out a short, bitter laugh.

“About *us*. About how we haven’t had a real conversation in weeks. About how every time I try to touch you, you pull away. About how you’ve been acting like a completely different person ever since that night with Vanessa and Jordan.”

Mark’s jaw tightened.

“I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Of course you don’t,” Claire snapped. “You never want to do this. You’d rather just sit there and pretend everything’s fine while our marriage falls apart.”

Mark stood up, his voice rising.

“What do you want from me, Claire? You’re the one who keeps bringing them up. You’re the one who can’t stop thinking about them. You’re the one who acts like they’re some kind of fucking gods who showed you what real sex is supposed to feel like!”

Claire’s eyes flashed.

“Because they *did*! For the first time in years, I felt *seen*. I felt *desired*. And you’ve been treating me like I’m the problem ever since!”

Mark laughed — a harsh, ugly sound.

“You want to talk about problems? Let’s talk about how you’ve been walking around here like some kind of fucking martyr. Like I’m the one who ruined everything. Like I’m the one who’s not good enough!”

Claire’s voice cracked.

“You’re not! Not anymore! Not compared to him!”

The words hung in the air like a gunshot.

Mark stared at her, his face pale.

Claire’s hands were shaking. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud. But now that it was out, she couldn’t take it back.

Mark’s voice was quiet when he finally spoke.

“So that’s what this is really about. You think Jordan is better than me.”

Claire didn’t answer.

She didn’t have to.

Mark let out a long, shaky breath and ran both hands through his hair.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said. “I can’t keep pretending like everything’s okay when it’s not. I can’t keep competing with two fucking strangers who don’t even care about us.”

Claire’s eyes filled with tears.

“I never asked you to compete with them.”

“Didn’t you?” Mark shot back. “Every time you look at me now, I can see it in your eyes. You’re disappointed. You’re comparing me to him. And I’m fucking *losing*.”

Claire wiped her eyes angrily.

“I’m not the only one doing the comparing. You think I don’t see the way you’ve been acting? The way you’ve been hitting the gym like a maniac? The way you’ve been avoiding

me? You're obsessed with what Jordan thinks of you. You're obsessed with proving something to *him*."

Mark stared at her, his chest heaving.

They stood there in the middle of the living room, breathing hard, years of quiet resentment finally boiling over.

"I don't even know who you are anymore," Claire whispered.

Mark's voice was raw.

"I don't know who *you* are either."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Claire turned away, wrapping her arms around herself.

"I think we need some space," she said quietly.

Mark didn't argue.

He just nodded once, grabbed his keys off the counter, and walked out the front door without another word.

Claire stood there alone in the living room, listening to his truck pull out of the driveway.

For the first time in nine years of marriage, she didn't know if he was coming back.

And she wasn't sure if she wanted him to.

End of Chapter 8

Chapter 9: The Final Corruption

Chapter 9: The Final Corruption

The hotel room was thick with tension.

Claire stood near the bed, naked and trembling, while Mark stood a few feet away, also naked, his jaw clenched so tightly it looked painful. Vanessa sat in the armchair by the window with her crutches resting beside her. Jordan leaned against the dresser, arms crossed, watching everything with cold detachment.

Vanessa spoke first, her voice calm and smooth.

“You’ve both been so brave,” she said. “But bravery only takes you so far. Tonight, we’re going to finish what we started. No more pretending. No more holding back.”

She looked at Claire.

“Get on your knees.”

Claire hesitated for only a second before obeying, sinking to the floor in front of Jordan.

Vanessa turned to Mark.

“Watch. And don’t look away.”

Mark’s breathing was ragged, but he didn’t move.

Jordan stepped forward and unzipped his pants. Claire took him into her mouth without being told, her eyes glassy and distant. She moved mechanically, like someone who had already given up.

Mark watched the entire time, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. His face was pale, his eyes burning with a mixture of rage, humiliation, and something deeper — something that looked dangerously close to grief.

When it was over, Jordan stepped back and calmly zipped up his pants like nothing had happened.

Claire stayed on her knees, staring at the floor.

Mark finally spoke, his voice low and rough.

“You know what’s fucked up?”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Mark let out a short, bitter laugh and ran a hand through his hair.

“I used to think people like you were better than us. Smarter. More sophisticated. I thought that’s why Claire looked at you the way she did. Like you had something we didn’t.”

He looked directly at Vanessa and Jordan, his eyes suddenly sharp and clear.

“But you don’t, do you? You’re not better. You’re just… empty. You destroy people because it’s the only thing that makes you feel alive. That’s why you do this. Not because you’re some kind of dark angels or whatever the fuck you think you are. You do it because you’re broken. And you need to break other people to feel whole.”

Vanessa’s expression didn’t change, but something flickered behind her eyes.

Jordan stayed perfectly still.

Mark shook his head, almost pitying.

“You two are so fucking good at tearing people apart… but you don’t even know how to want someone for real. You don’t know how to *be* wanted. Not without destroying them first.”

He looked at both of them, his voice quiet but steady.

“Why don’t you guys want *me*?”

The question hung in the air like a blade.

Mark didn’t wait for an answer. He grabbed his clothes off the chair, dressed quickly, and walked to the door. Before he left, he looked back one last time.

“You’re not gods,” he said. “You’re just two scared, fucked-up people who don’t know how to love anything without breaking it.”

Then he walked out and closed the door behind him.

The room was silent.

Claire stayed on her knees, shaking.

Vanessa and Jordan didn’t speak for a long time.

Finally, Vanessa stood up slowly, leaning on her crutches.

“Well,” she said quietly. “That was… unexpected.”

Jordan stared at the door Mark had just walked through, his expression unreadable.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was.”

End of Chapter 9

Chapter 10: Murphy's Tavern

Chapter 10: The Collapse (Full Revised Version)

The parking lot of Murphy’s Tavern was packed on a warm Friday night. Cars lined the edges of the lot, and groups of people stood around talking, laughing, and drinking. The smell of grilled food and cigarette smoke hung in the air. It was the kind of night where half the town came out to unwind after a long week.

No one expected a public meltdown.

But that’s exactly what they got.

Claire stood in the middle of the parking lot, her face streaked with mascara, screaming at Mark like her life depended on it. Her voice carried across the entire lot, drawing more and more people out of the bar to watch.

“You *cheated* on me!” she screamed, pointing a shaking finger at him. “With *both* of them! You let that woman touch you while I stood there like an idiot! You let him fuck my mouth while you watched! And then you had the nerve to act like *I* was the problem!”

Mark stood a few feet away, his face pale and furious. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

“I didn’t cheat on you!” he shouted back. “I *watched*! That’s all I did! I stood there like a fucking statue while they used you — while *you* let them use you! I didn’t touch either of them! I didn’t *want* to! But you still looked at Jordan like he was everything I’m not!”

The crowd murmured. Some people exchanged glances. A few had pulled out their phones.

Claire’s voice cracked as she screamed louder:

“Because for once in nine years, I felt *desired*! I felt *wanted*! Jordan made me feel things you haven’t made me feel in years! And Vanessa… she actually *saw* me. She didn’t treat me like some boring housewife who should just be grateful for whatever she gets!”

Mark took a step closer, his voice shaking with rage.

“You think I *enjoyed* watching that? You think I liked seeing my wife on her knees for another man? I felt sick! I felt like I was losing you right in front of my fucking eyes! And you didn’t even care!”

Claire let out a bitter, broken laugh.

“Because you’ve been treating me like I’m invisible for years! At least *they* made me feel alive!”

Mark stared at her, his chest heaving.

“You want to talk about invisible?” he shot back. “I’ve been killing myself trying to be enough for you! Going to the gym every day, trying to be more confident, trying to be more like *him* — and it’s never fucking enough! You still look at me like I’m a disappointment!”

Claire’s voice rose even higher.

“You *are* a disappointment! You’re weak! You’re soft! Just like he said!”

The entire parking lot went silent.

Mark took a step back like he’d been physically struck. His face went completely blank for a moment before twisting with pain.

Claire’s hands flew to her mouth the second the words left her lips. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Mark… I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did,” he said quietly. His voice was calm now. Too calm. “You’ve been thinking it for weeks. You just finally said it out loud.”

Claire started crying in earnest, her shoulders shaking.

Mark let out a short, broken laugh and ran both hands through his hair.

“You know what the worst part is?” he said. “I didn’t even touch them. I didn’t fuck Vanessa. I didn’t fuck Jordan. I just stood there and watched while my wife did. And you still look at me like *I’m* the one who betrayed you.”

He shook his head, his voice raw.

“I’m done, Claire. I can’t keep competing with two strangers who don’t even give a shit about us. I can’t keep trying to be someone I’m not just to make you look at me the way you looked at them.”

Claire wiped her eyes, her voice trembling.

“Mark… please—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off. “I’m done pretending. I’m done fighting for something that’s already dead.”

He turned and walked toward his truck without looking back.

Claire stood there alone in the middle of the parking lot, surrounded by half the town, her marriage in ruins around her. People were still staring. Some were whispering. Others were openly filming.

She wrapped her arms around herself and started to sob — deep, gut-wrenching sobs that shook her entire body.

No one approached her.

No one offered comfort.

She was left standing there — broken, humiliated, and completely hollow.

Mark’s truck peeled out of the parking lot and disappeared down the road.

Claire sank to her knees in the gravel, crying so hard she could barely breathe.

The crowd slowly began to disperse, but the damage was done.

Their marriage was over.

And everyone in town now knew it.

End of Chapter 10

Chapter 11: Rule 3

Chapter 11: The Reward

Vanessa lay on her back in the hotel bed, staring up at the ceiling as the first pale light of dawn crept through the curtains. Her black cast rested on a pillow beside her, and her body still hummed with the lingering echoes of pleasure and adrenaline.

Jordan lay next to her, one arm draped across her stomach, his breathing slow and steady. They had barely spoken since they returned to the suite hours earlier. The silence between them was heavy, but not uncomfortable.

They both knew what came next.

Vanessa turned her head slightly to look at him.

“We did it,” she said quietly.

Jordan didn’t open his eyes.

“Yeah,” he murmured. “We did.”

Vanessa let out a slow breath.

“I can still hear him,” she said. “Mark. The way he looked at us before he walked out. That moment when he realized exactly what we are.”

Jordan finally opened his eyes and looked at her.

“He thought he was being profound,” he said. “Thought he was revealing some great truth about us.”

Vanessa smiled faintly.

“He wasn’t wrong. We *are* broken. We *do* destroy people to feel alive.”

Jordan propped himself up on one elbow, studying her face.

“But that’s not the whole story, is it?”

Vanessa shook her head.

“No. It’s not.”

She sat up slowly, wincing slightly as she adjusted her injured leg, then turned to face him fully.

“People like Mark and Claire… they live these small, careful lives. They convince themselves that love is supposed to be quiet and safe and predictable. They settle. They compromise. They die a little more every year without even realizing it.”

Jordan listened without interrupting.

Vanessa’s voice was calm, almost gentle.

“We don’t do that. We don’t settle. We don’t lie to ourselves about what we want. We take what we want. We burn through people because we *can*. Because we’re strong enough to survive the fire.”

Jordan reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

“And because it feels good,” he said.

Vanessa smiled.

“Yes. Because it feels *incredible*.”

She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“Mark thought he was exposing us. But he was just revealing how small his world is. He’ll never understand what it feels like to stand on the edge of someone else’s life and push. To watch everything they built crumble and know that *you* were the one who made it happen.”

Jordan’s eyes darkened with something hungry and familiar.

“It’s addictive,” he said. “The power. The control. The rush of knowing you can destroy something beautiful just because you feel like it.”

Vanessa nodded.

“And that’s the truth Mark could never accept. We don’t destroy marriages because we’re broken. We destroy them because we’re *alive*. Because we refuse to live half-lives like everyone else.”

Jordan leaned in and kissed her, slow and deep.

When he pulled back, his voice was low and certain.

“We’re not the monsters he thinks we are.”

Vanessa smiled against his lips.

“No,” she agreed. “We’re something much worse.”

She kissed him again, harder this time, her hands sliding into his hair.

Jordan pushed her gently onto her back, careful of her cast, and moved over her. Their lovemaking was intense — darker and more urgent than usual. There was no tenderness this

time. Only hunger. Only need. Only the raw, addictive rush of two people who had just destroyed another couple and were now claiming their reward.

When it was over, they lay tangled together, breathing hard.

Vanessa stared at the ceiling, her voice soft but steady.

“It’s time to go.”

Jordan didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

Vanessa turned her head to look at him.

“Millfield was… educational. But I’m ready for something bigger. Something with higher stakes.”

Jordan smiled, slow and dangerous.

“Me too.”

He reached over and gently traced his fingers down her arm.

“Where to next?”

Vanessa’s eyes gleamed in the early morning light.

“Anywhere but here.”

Jordan leaned in and kissed her one last time — slow, deep, and possessive.

Outside, the sun was rising over the small Midwestern town.

Inside, two monsters lay in bed, already planning their next hunt.

They were done with Millfield.

And somewhere out there, another couple was about to make the worst mistake of their lives.

End of Chapter 11
End of Book 6

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